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Between Myth and Reality : The construction of the Sa'îdi identity

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Introduction

Within the Egyptian political and artistic arena (including newspaper, radio, movies, TV serials, novels, etc.), there has been a constant tendency, at least since the early 20th c., to describe Upper Egypt (hereafter *as-Sa'îd*) as a specific region, characterized by its immobility, isolation, roughness, traditionalism, under development, etc. In the 1990s, the emergence of Islamic activism, and particularly the violent actions of the *Jama'iyyât Islamiyya*, raised a new set of questions concerning the reasons why Islamism networks were particularly active in *as-Sa'îd*: was it due mainly to socio-economical factors (poverty, under-development) or to socio-cultural factors (cf. family organization, importance of the *târ* "vendetta") or to religious factors or to a combination of all those factors? Many Egyptian newspapers and books were addressing these questions and were always stressing "How unknown and unfamiliar and neglected Upper Egypt was for the State and its political circles".¹ All these "public discourses" or dominant meta-narratives (political, artistic or academic) tend to present Upper Egypt as a regional entity characterized by its "otherness" compared to the rest of Egypt (which means in fact mainly Cairo!). They, therefore, participate in the strengthening of identity boundaries by spreading the perception of a specific region characterized by a distinctive collective regional Sa'îdi identity.

The construction of a Sa'îdi identity (*as-Sa'îdiyya*), as expressed by Upper Egyptians in Cairo, will be the core of this paper. The Sa'îdi identity is approached within the theoretical paradigm of identity, which defines collective identities (ethnic or national or regional) as historical and situational processes of affiliation and categorization (the "we-group" versus the "they-group"). Collective identities refer ideally, in the perception of its members and non-members, to a distinctive group, although affiliation processes do not always rely on objective criteria.² Moreover, interaction plays a

¹ cf. for a recent publication: the Issue 16 of *Ahwâl Misriyya*, 2002 "as-Sa'îd zalika al-majhûl", Cairo, Al Ahrâm Center for Political and Strategic Studies, p. 42-115

² cf. see Barth's concept of Ethnic boundaries in Barth 1969

crucial role in the processes of identification, i.e. people claim to belong to a given group but they are also assigned to a given group by outsiders. In many contexts, an external imposed identity becomes a means of self-affiliation, and ostracized groups tend to inverse external imposed derogatory stereotypes and transform them into self-adhering positive values.³ *as-Sa'adiyya* will be studied through an analyze of the interaction between the “dominant” public discourse and the migrant discourse. The articulation between discourses/representation (i.e. the “subjective factors”) and practices (i.e. the “objective factors”) indicates that many features, pointed out as ‘specifically Sa’îdi’ by both outsiders and insiders, have nothing specific but, nevertheless, function as symbolic markers. The Sa’îd, as an ‘internal other’, came to play a fundamental symbolic role in the Egyptian society, a role that was historically endorsed by the rural areas or the Bedouin *vis à vis* the Cairene urban society.

This paper is based on data collected in 1994 and 1998 during a sociolinguistic research on the Cairene Upper Egyptian communities, and more precisely on the Upper Egyptian migrants originating from Sohag and Qena Governorates and living in the so-called *manâtiq al ashwa'iya* of Gizah. The mid-1990s were a time of heavy confrontation between the Egyptian State apparatus and the military arms of the Jama'ât Islamiyya. This context favored the development of the “public” discourses mentioned above. In Cairo, Upper Egyptian themselves, were/are reacting very strongly to the stereotypes spread by these public meta-narratives. They were/are particularly sensitive to the perception that outsiders (i.e. non Sa'aîda) have from Upper Egypt. They tend to provide a stereotyped description of their home region (either positive or negative) and to stress its differences compared to the Cairene urban context. They, therefore, participate also actively in the elaboration of a Sa'îdi entity. Some of them, as members of political parties, journalists, intellectuals, businessmen, contractors, play an influential role and might become actors of change in both Cairo and their home region.

The main assumption of this paper is that Upper Egypt, as a region, has indeed a long history of “specificity” due to a combination of geographical, economical, political and cultural factors. However, the claim of a distinctive Sa'îdi identity, and moreover its political instrumentalization, seem to be rather contemporary phenomena induced by the political and economical changes of the 20th c.. Among the major factors of change are internal rural/urban migration (i.e. within Egypt), migration to the Gulf countries, development of Islamic fundamentalism, emergence of new social classes. Like any other processes of collective building (being “ethnic” or “regional” or “national”) , *as-sa'adiyya* creates a discourse on the “origin”, mobilizing ancestors and myths and acting to bring together disparate classes of people. The building of a Sa'îdi entity implies that the most prevalent disparities within the Upper Egyptian society, i.e. those created by the rigid social hierarchy, are

³ Among the numerous references, Goffman 1963 & 1967 remain the classics. Many recent works on ethnic groups, migrant communities, minorities and street gangs have studied the phenomena of positive inversion of stereotypes.

somehow leveled to enable a stronger feeling of common affiliation. Although the Sa'îdiyya discourse often refers to traditional cultural values (*asl*, honor, religion, etc.), it aims to and induces a number of social changes, at least in Cairo. In this sense, it is not very different from the Islamist reformist discourse, which whom it shares a number of common values. It appears also very close to any process of "emerging nationalism" (Gellner 1983). The question of the importance of the "Saidi problem" within the national Egyptian political arena will be discussed in the conclusion. Finally, there is not one Sa'îdiyya discourse, but many, according to the social origin of the speakers and to the context. What is presented here reflects mainly the discourse of low-middle class male Cairene Upper Egyptian speakers in the political context of the 1990s.

I. As-Sa'îdiyya as seen by the outsiders : the various perceptions of the Upper Egyptian Identity

I borrow, here, the expression, *as-sa'îdiyya*, to Khalid Mahmud (2002). His article, entitled *mâ ba'd as-Sa'îdiyya*, raises a number of questions concerning the bases of a Sa'îdi identity and provides a good source for discussion. However, my perspectives are rather different from his. Mahmud points to a number of "objective" historical factors considered as indicators of the Upper Egyptian specificity. He indicates that most of these factors are no longer valid due to social changes within Upper Egypt and greater exposure to the global world. He seems therefore to believe that a specific Sa'îdi identity, conceived within a normative and substantialist frame, has less and less real grounds, and is condemned to disappear or to become frozen in a kind of folkloric form. On the contrary, I tend to believe that socio-economic and political transformations are precisely the factors reinforcing the construction of a Sa'îdi identity, or at least enhancing the public expression of a Sa'îdi affiliation to achieve social and political benefits. As mentioned by P. Gran (this volume), the long economical and political domination of Upper Egypt has often been presented within a culturalist and folklorist vision. The Upper Egyptian intellectuals and elite have for decades participated in the folklorization and culturalization of the Upper Egyptian domination. I would tend to think that the 1990s Upper Egyptian mobilization represent a more active political trend, which melt religious, cultural, social and political aspirations.

A number of questions will, for the time being, remain unanswered. We have no clue to ascertain since when and how far Upper Egypt is perceived, by both insiders and outsiders, as a specific area with a specific culture and identity. It is difficult to know if the present-day Sa'îdiyya discourse emerges as a consequence from a new context or was present since a long time but covered for various reasons. The contemporary claim of a specific Sa'îdi identity is built on by referring to a combination of objective and subjective factors. Each actor tends to privilege or to point out some characteristic factors. Before to turn to the Upper Egyptian migrants discourse, I would like to briefly present some factors that are

often considered (and referred to) as “objective” criteria pointing to an Upper Egyptian regional specificity. These factors have been collected and somehow randomly selected from various academic sources. In themselves they do not represent an “objective list”, but they are important in the sense that, considered as “more scientific”, they participate in the framing of our own perception of Upper Egypt. I will then briefly analyze the explanatory factors advanced by the “dominant Egyptian discourse” (i.e. the Egyptian intellectual and political elite) and contrast them with the criteria provided by members of the Cairene Upper Egyptian low-middle class and some Upper Egyptian intellectuals.

I.1. Some “academic objective” factors pointing to an Upper Egyptian regional specificity: evidences and ambiguities

Among the many “objective” factors, found in the academic literature, which seem to corroborate a certain Upper Egyptian specificity, we can briefly quote:

- the ecological factors, the large Delta versus the narrow Nile Valley, humidity versus aridity, which partly explain the perception of Upper Egypt as a “remote” region
- the historical political factors, with the very old Northern versus Southern Egyptian division, attested since early antiquity.⁴ This division has always been reflected by administrative and political divisions.⁵ Due to its remoteness from Central State, Upper Egypt have been autonomous at various periods and had its own political centres.⁶
- the historical patterns of settlement. Since the Arab conquest, patterns of settlement have been quite different in the North and the South. The Arab groups came to settle earlier in the Central Delta and melted with the local population. In Upper Egypt, the Coptic presence remained strong up to the 15th c. Various waves of Bedouin groups have been recorded from the 9th century onwards but their role and influence has been particularly important from the 15th up to the beginning of the 19th c. Among these Bedouin groups, the Hawwâra, of North African origin came to play a dominant political role in the area of Jirja between the 16th and 18th c.⁷
- the linguistic factors with a quite clear dialectal boundary between the Delta and the Nile Valley, approximately South of to-day Modern Cairo. This boundary is attested in both late Antiquity (Bohairic versus Sahidic Coptic dialects)⁸ and the modern period (Delta Arabic dialects versus

⁴ cf. see for example the Myth of Isis and Osiris in Al-Aswad this volume

⁵ See for example the Administrative Maps of Egypt published in Tousoum 1926, which includes maps from the pre-Islamic periods

⁶ cf. for a brief review for the Arab period see Mahmud 2002. The region of Jirja during the Hawwâra reign has been a very important political center (Ahmad 1997).

⁷ For the influence and role of Bedouin Arab tribes in Upper Egypt see Ahmed 1987, al-Rayty 1997, Garcin 1976 & 1978, Hiroshi 2001, and of course the Arab historians like al-Jabartî, al-Qalqashandî, al-Maqrîzî (*al-Bayyân w-al ‘i’râb, Sûlûk*).

⁸ For the dialectal situation during the Coptic period see Atiya (ed.) 1991, Kasser 1991, Vergotte 1992.

Nile valley Arabic Dialects).⁹ Linguistic criteria and cultural material criteria point to another important boundary, that of Asyout, between Middle Egypt and Upper Egypt¹⁰.

- the cultural factors, the Delta having been more exposed to external influences, at least since the French expedition and the colonial period, while the Nile valley is often described as an area of isolation and preservation keeping either a Pharaonic heritage or a 'pure' Arab heritage. This can be found in a number of early Orientalist descriptions.¹¹ The reference to absence of changes and to traditionalism as main characteristics of the Sa'îdi culture and society is one of the most frequent element founded in all types of discourses (academic, social actors, etc. cf. Ireton 2000)¹²
- the religious factors, reflected among other by the presence of the Hanafi versus Maliki religious legal schools (*madhhab*) as well as the presence of different Sufi brotherhoods. In the 19th c., Upper Egypt was religiously more closely associated with the Hijaz or Sudan than with Cairo (see Sedgwick, this volume) and there were a number of active Upper Egyptian religious centers such as Jirja. The regional difference was also attested within Al-Azhar. Since the 18th c. there was a distinct Sa'îdi *riwâq* in Al-Azhar (see Chich, this volume).
- the contemporary socio-economic factors, with the smaller impact of the agrarian reforms on social structures, which can be seen in the maintenance of patriarchal and patron-client social structures (e.g. see in particular Adams 1986 & Hopkins 1988)¹³
- the prevailing under-development, attested by all types of demographic and economic data (level of education, level of morbidity, level of unemployment, rate of poverty, etc.), which also explains the maintenance of traditional social structures (clanic structures, vendetta, etc.)

All the above-mentioned factors are only a few of what can be found in the literature. It is obvious that the above list is a mixture of old-attested versus new factors, material versus cultural factors, etc. For each point, counter-arguments showing similarities and old link between Northern and Southern Egypt could also be found. Anthropological researches in both areas point to a number of common social structures and cultural values like the importance of family and lineage structures, cultural valorization of endogamy, importance of the notions of honor, shame, blessing, common popular religious practices, etc.¹⁴ Moreover, nor the Delta nor Upper Egypt form homogeneous entities and there are many internal differences and many ambiguities concerning even the territorial definition of each entity (Ireton 2000). The Central part of the Delta is quite different from its eastern and western wings. The Nile Valley is divided in Middle (from Giza to Asyout) and Upper Egypt (from Asyout to

⁹ For a detailed description of the Arabic dialectal map see Behnstedt and Woidich (1985-1994), Woidich (1997)

¹⁰ cf. Woidich 1997, Winkler 1936

¹¹ For the Pharaonic heritage see Blackman 1927 and also Ayrut, 1938. For a very sane critical review of the invention of the Peasant figure within the Orientalist literature see Mitchell 1990.

¹² For a critic of this orientalist conception within dominant historiography see Gran, this volume.

¹³ For studies on impact of Agrarian reforms on rural society see Adams 1986, Hopkins 1988, Hopkins & Westergaard (eds) 1998, Saunders & Melenna 1986, Toth 1991

Aswan). These divisions are known in the ‘popular discourse’. If all Egyptians use to distinguish between *al-Bahar* (the North) and *as-Sa’id* (the South) they also establish a distinction between *as-Sa’id il-barrâni* (“the external Said”, i.e. Middle Egypt) and *is-sa’id al-juwwâni* (“the deep Said”, i.e. Upper Egypt) and there is a lot of discussion concerning whether or not the northern area of Middle Egypt (from Gizah to Minyah) is part of the “real Sa’id”.

I.2. The linguistic data: from Coptic to Bedouin Heritage

The linguistic situation is a good example of this complexity. As mentioned, linguistic data indicate the presence of a dialectal boundary between the Delta and the Nile Valley, as early at the late Antiquity with the presence, during the Coptic era, of two regional literary varieties (the Bohairic variety and the Sahidic variety); each one being divided in a number of sub-local variety. Today the Arabic dialectal map, drawn by Behnstedt and Woidich, indicates the same prevalent dialectal boundary between Delta Arabic dialects and Nile Valley dialects, divided again in a number of sub-dialectal groups. The Nile Valley dialects is divided in two main sub-groups (Middle Egyptian and Upper Egyptian), themselves divided in sub-sub groups. An interesting point is that some local varieties of Upper Egypt share a number of similar linguistic features with some local varieties of the Delta. The linguistic history of Egypt indicates that, in spite of the maintenance of the same dialectal boundary between Northern and Southern Egypt, there is, in fact, no clear historical linguistic continuity from Antiquity to Contemporary time. The main factor of historical linguistic discontinuity has been the settlement of former Bedouin Arab tribes, who seemed to have played a primordial role in the process of Arabization.¹⁵ One of the main contemporary factor of dialectal diversity is the difference between Sedentary-type Arabic varieties and Bedouin-type Arabic varieties. Today, traces of Bedouin-like features¹⁶ within a particular variety does not mean that the speakers of this variety has a Bedouin-type of life but it indicates an historical strong Bedouin presence. The contemporary dialectal map indicates that the Bedouin linguistic influence is stronger in the region South of Asyout and also in the Eastern and Western margins of the Delta while the dialectal varieties of Central Delta, Cairo, parts of Middle Egypt and one area of Upper Egypt (UE2) have more sedentary-types features. Linguistic data are therefore relatively ambiguous and indicate the presence of a North-South linguistic boundary but also internal diversity within the Nile valley (from Giza to Aswan) and sometimes similarities between specific Northern and Southern varieties.

Nevertheless, an important Upper Egyptian component, pointed out by both linguistic and historical data, is the strong influence of former Arab Bedouin tribal groups, particularly those of North African

¹⁴ see for instance Abou-Zeid 1967 ; Abu-Lughod 1987, El-Aswad this volume , El-Karanshawy 1998, Gosh 1982, Weyland 1993,

¹⁵ For historical analyses of linguistic arabization and relevant references see Björnesö 1997, Rubenson 1997, Woidich 1997

origin, such as the Hawwâra, in the region South of Asyût. The social history of the former Bedouin Arab groups in Upper Egypt is still seriously under-studied, in spite of their considerable social weight (Hiroshi 2001). It is well-known that the 19th c., under Mohammed Ali policy has been a turning point for the social status of the Nile Valley Bedouin groups, that led to their sedentarisation and official transformation into *fallâhîn* ‘peasants’. However, the social stratification within the local society indicates that tribal or clanic origin still play an important, if not dominant, role.¹⁷ In many areas, the local society is divided in a strong social hierarchy with at its top families claiming to belong to well-known tribes or lineages (*qabîla* or *badan*) such as the Hawwâra, Juhayna, Ashraf, etc., then families (*‘a’îla* or *bayt*) claiming various Arab ascendance more or less connected to well-known Arab tribes or lineages, then Christian families often known as *khawâga*, especially when living in urban centers, and at the bottom low-status or paria groups such as the Gypsies (*Hallab*). The social weight of the elite of the former Bedouin Arab groups must not be considered as an Upper Egyptian exclusivity. It might be found in many other areas of Egypt, but nevertheless, seems to constitute a strong element of local identification. Reference to a glorious Arab Bedouin heritage is now an important component of the new *Sa’idiyya* discourse (e.g. section II.3), while references to remoteness, under-development and traditionalism are the main factors advanced by Egyptian political and intellectual circles to explain Upper Egyptian specificity.

I.3. Egyptian dominant discourse and the reference to under development and traditionalism as the main criteria of Upper Egyptian specificity: shifting from regional characteristics to cultural specificity

In the mid 1990s, the emergence of a violent Islamic activism in both Upper Egypt and in the popular settlements of Cairo (such as Imbâba) was the occasion, for the think-tankers of political analyses, the journalists, the political leadership, etc. to analyze the reasons of such a situation and to provide their own explications concerning the Upper Egyptian specificity. I will not, here, devote too much time to this issue which has been discussed at length. A short review of newspapers, books, TV and radio programmes indicates that two main factors were quoted as causal explanation of this violent phenomenon. One, was the economical under-development of Upper Egypt, with its long list of causes and consequences: lack of agricultural land, lack of industries, lack of State investments and involvement, remoteness from the Capital, absence of job opportunities, high rate of rural migration, low level of education, poor level of health care, etc., all this leading to high rates of poverty and to

¹⁶ For detailed description of more Bedouin-type versus more sedentary type within Egyptian Arabic dialects, see B&W 1985, Woidich 1997. Bedouin-like features can be traced in the phonology, the syllabic structures, the lexicon, etc.

¹⁷ For some references see Abdel Razaq (1997) for Qena, Ammar (1954) for Silwa, Jad (1996) for Sohag, R. Saad (1998) for Edfu and a number of papers in this volume.

social despair. Upper Egypt was described as an isolated, unseen and forgotten region.¹⁸ Another causal explanation was of the cultural-type: the famous conservatism and traditionalism of the Upper Egyptian society exemplified by the tradition of *târ* “vendetta”, the dominant role of the extended families (*‘â’ilât*), the “visceral” defiance vis a vis the State institution, the refusal to submit to the State control, etc.¹⁹ Islamic violence in Upper Egypt has often been associated to a specific Upper Egyptian culture of violence.²⁰ Traditionalism was considered as either a cause or a consequence of under-development. Other manifestations of this traditionalism could be seen in the status of the women, the religious conservatism, but also in a number of supposed Sa’îdi social values such as moral rigor, toughness, lack of sophistication, physical endurance, etc.. As pointed out by F. Ireton (2000), all the moral characteristics associated with this notion of traditionalism can be perceived as either positive or negative, according to the individual’s ideological position. Positively they are associated with a notion like *‘asala* “noble heritage” and are in fact related to the stereotyped vision of the “pure, non-spoilt” rural dweller as opposed to the sophisticated but spoiled urban dweller. Negatively they are associated with ignorance, backwardness, inability to adopt to modern changes, etc. All these stereotypes associated with the Upper Egyptian cultural traditionalism are reproduced in the Egyptian literature, movies, TV serials, dealing with the Upper Egyptian society²¹ or with the Upper Egyptian migrants in Cairo.²² They are also often reproduced by Upper Egyptian intellectuals and journalists even when their objective is to oppose the pejorative vision of Sa’îd.²³ It is notable that this vision of conservatism and traditionalism has also been projected to the rural areas of Northern Egypt and reflects the classical traditional dichotomy between rurality - associated with tradition and conservatism-, versus urbanity -associated with cosmopolitanism and modernity-. However, in the Egyptian case, it seems that the dichotomy has shifted a little bit and that Upper Egypt endorsed more and more the role of “the Tradition”, which was before shared by other areas. In a parallel shift, the early pejorative perception that the dominant Cairene elite had of the traditional popular urban districts (*al-ahya ash-sha’abiyya*) has moved to the new urban informal settlements (*al-ashawa’iyyât*), where many Upper Egyptians live.²⁴ Reference to “tradition” is one of the main base of the *sa’idiyya* discourse, a discourse which tends, in its political form, to challenge the northern Cairene urban model and to praise the moral values and historical achievements of the Sa’aîda in order to justify their aspiration for social and political ascension.

¹⁸ cf. see for example Al-Ahrâm 10/10/1994, Al Wafd 5/5/1994, Al-Ahram Weekly 9/1996

¹⁹ cf. see for example Al-Akhbâr 21/4/1994.

²⁰ cf. Haeni 2001 for an analysis of this cultural lecture of Islamic violence in Upper Egypt.

²¹ Movies focusing on the *târ* in Upper Egypt go from Classical *Du’a Al-Karawân* by Barakât, *Duma’ ‘ala-l-Nîl* by M. Mustâfa, *Shay’ min al-Khawf* by H. Kamal, *Al-Tawq w-al-‘Aswira* by K. Bishâra, *Al Thâr* by M. Khân to the 1997 TV serial *Khâltî Sâfiyya wa Dayr* from a novel by Baha Tâhir.

²² Among the famous movies or TV serials portraying the arrival of the poor Upper Egyptian migrants between 1960-1980: *Al Atâba Al Khadra* by F. Abdel Wahab, *Shabâb Imra’* and *Al-Futûwwa* by S. Abû Seyf, *Hinâ al Qâhira* (TV serie). In the 1990s *Al Bey al-Bawwâb* by H. Ibrahim, *Hilm Al Janûbî* (TV serie) and more recently (2000?) *as-sa’îdi fi jami’a amrika*

²³ Many papers of *Al-Usbû’* and *Rôz-Al-Yussif* were falling within this category.

I.4 The Northern/Southern conflicts in Cairo: the impact of Migration

In July 2002, some Egyptian newspapers launched a strong campaign against the Governor of Cairo, the general Abdel Rahîm Shahâtta.²⁵ The official motive of complain was the Governor's statement that migration flews from *as-Sa'id* (Upper Egypt) and *al-rîf* (Northern Egypt) to Cairo were to be regulated and limited in order to preserve the urban stability. The idea that massive provincial/rural migration is a destabilizing factor for urban development is not new and appears regularly in various institutional publications and political discourses throughout the world.²⁶ What was interesting in this press campaign was the fact that it was quickly interpreted in terms of a dual confrontation between the Governor (the State) and the Cairene Upper Egyptian population. This governor had been previously suspected by some Upper Egyptian journalists to be "anti-sa'îdi".²⁷ According to some newspapers, the Governor intention was to forbid Upper Egyptian migration to Cairo or even to expelled Upper Egyptians from Cairo. The titles of the newspapers were of the types *matâridat as-sa'âida fî-shawâri' al-qâhira* (chasing away Sa'îdi-s from Cairo Streets)²⁸ or *as-sa'âida yahtajun 'ala khittta al-muhâfiz bi-mana'ihim min dukhûl al-qâhira* (Upper Egyptians are indignant at the Governor's plan to forbid them of entering Cairo)²⁹ or *hal ya'amir muhâfiz al-qâhira bi-tarhîl Shaykh al-Azhar w-al-Bâbâ Shenûda?* (does the Governor plot to transfer the Shaykh of Al-Azhar and the Baba Shenouda?).³⁰ This press-campaign was an occasion, for what some observers call the Sa'îdi lobby,³¹ to complain once more about the bad image, status and treatment of Upper Egyptians in Cairo and to recall all the famous historical and contemporary Upper Egyptian figures. This event can be considered has 'a tempête dans un verre d'eau', one of the regular small campaigns launched by a supposed opposition press. However, it is one of the many manifestations of misunderstandings, if not high tensions, between the state apparatus and some segments of the Upper Egyptian population in both Upper Egypt and Cairo.

The presence of a high number of "poor" Upper Egyptian migrants is regularly mentioned by various political or institutional authorities as one of the main causes of urban political violence and destabilization.³² In a rather symptomatic short cut, the Upper Egyptian migrants are associated with the pejorative and even catastrophic perception of the unplanned popular settlements, known as

²⁴ For a early perception of the Cairo popular districts, Rousillon 1996

²⁵ cf. Rôz al Yusif 12/7/02 , Al-Ahrâr 19/7/02, Al-Jîl 17/7/02, al-sâri' al-siyâsi 22/7/02, Sût al-'umma 29/7/02, al-'akhbâr 4/8/2002, al-wafd 17/07/02

²⁶ e.g. the PNUD Egypt Human Development Report of 1996 which says among other (p. 35) " what distinguishes the suburb from the village and city communities is the disruption of social organization. (p.53) " In fact the settlement of an enormous number of urban poors on the fringe of the metropolitan city, disrupts the arrangement of the old neighbourhoods, physically and socially ".

²⁷ al-Usbû' 27/4/1998

²⁸ al-ahrâr 19/7/2002

²⁹ Rôz al-yûsif 12/7/02

³⁰ al-mîdan 27/7/02

³¹ al-Jîl 17/7/2002

³² see the quotation of Sahykh Gamal Qutb in P. Granway, this volume.

manâtiq 'ashwa'iyya (or *ashwa'iyyât*), and described as areas of poverty, instability, social delinquency, nest of terrorism and islamist activism etc.³³ Titles such as *Imbâba qumbulat as-Sa'âida* (Imbaba the Bomb of the Sa'îdi-s) ³⁴ or *al-'ashwa'iyyât manâtiq sinâ'at al-'irhâb* (The 'ashwa'iyyât , Regions of Terrorism production)³⁵ are very common and tend to generalize the idea that Upper Egyptians form the core population of those “dangerous uncontrolled urban areas”. Coming from their undeveloped and backwards regions, the Upper Egyptians are said to have brought with them their spirit of revolt, anti-state control, rigid conservatism, and the like.³⁶

Needless to say that those stereotypes have little to see with the reality. The migration trend from Upper Egypt (from Beni Suef to Aswan) has been and still is important but is by no way a “*ras de marée*”, and does not exceed significantly the migration from Northern Egypt. Provincial migration has played a major role in Cairo urban growth from 1848 to the mid 1980s.³⁷ But since the 1986 the percentage of the migrant population is receding and in 1996, provincial migrants were forming approximately 14% of total Great Cairo population.³⁸ In 1996, Upper Egyptians represented approximately 40% of G. Cairo migrant population and only 6 % of total G. Cairo population. However, this general census figure does not account for more complex processes. First, the census data include only the first migrant generation, (e.g. those not born in G. Cairo) and not the second or third migrant generation, (i.e. those born in G. Cairo from Upper Egyptian parents). Many of the latter claim a Sa'îdi affiliation and are identified as Sa'îdi by non Upper Egyptians. Second, Upper Egypt forms now one of the main migrant reservoirs, especially the regions of Asyout and Sohag, while up to the 1970s a high percentage of migrants were coming from the Delta (particularly Menoufiyya, Daqahliyya and Sharqiyya Governorates).³⁹ Finally migrants from Upper Egypt cluster in some residential areas, particularly in the popular areas of Gizah and Cairo, where they constitute important

³³ for a short review of how the press describes the *'ashwa'iyyât*, particularly after the 1992 Imbâba events, see Denis 1994, Haeni 2001, Singerman 1999. All these authors have correctly pointed the fact that the *'ashwa'iyyât* are perceived as the 'internal other'. See also Al-Sâwî (1996) for numerous Egyptian Academic references on the *'ashwa'iyyât* and a critical approach of urban development.

³⁴ Roz al-Yusif 15/2/1999

³⁵ Al Ahrâm 25/2/1994

³⁶ e.g. for example Saad ed Din Ibrahim's analysis of the violence in Imbâba quoted in Haenni 2001. According to him Islamic activity in Imbâba would be an extension of the Bedouin *sîba* (chaos). This rhetoric of the migrant cultural inadaptation is found also in most Western countries.

³⁷ Percentage of migrants within Greater Cairo population was 35% in 1846, 25.7% in 1907, 28.7% in 1917, 34% in 1927, 33.6% in 1947, 37.5% in 1960, 30% in 1976, 25.3% in 1986 (source Ireton 1997)

³⁸ Great Cairo includes the three administrative urban governorates of Cairo, Gizah and Qalyubiyya. Sources : 1996 Censuses, OUCC-Cedej Cairo. The migrant from Cairo Governorate to Giza and Qalyubiya urban Governorate have not been considered as provincial migrants.

³⁹ see the maps in Ireton 1997. Pre-modern 1952s migration from Upper Egypt is said to have included mainly two very different class of people: a) the educated members of the Upper Egyptian elite who came to Cairo for education, skilled-job opportunity, etc. and usually were assimilating quickly to the Cairo elite and b) the poor strata of Upper Egyptian population who came to work either as seasonal or permanent workers (Abu Lughod 1961, Zohri 2002). The economic developments of the 1970s and the international migration to the Gulf countries created new opportunities for Upper Egyptian workers in Cairo, particularly in the building sectors. The new migrants usually joined established relatives or village folks in the urban periphery.

communities.⁴⁰ A number of Upper Egyptian families have been the nucleus of some 1960-1970's urban settlements.⁴¹

The historical relationship between Upper Egypt and Northern Egypt, the particular history of migration and the present visibility of the late waves of Upper Egyptian migration, partly explained the present stigmatization of Upper Egyptian immigrants in Cairo. They are still often associated with the seasonal daily workers, who used to come in great number since the late 19th c under the *tarahîl* system.⁴² Today they still represent an important percentage of daily workers in the building economic sector (Zohry 2002) and can be seen in the streets or in the coffee-shop waiting for jobs. Being the last waves of migrants, they attract public attention and are the target of all negative stereotypes. Today, the social representation of Cairo Upper Egyptians enlarged considerably and includes almost all types of people and all class levels. Nevertheless, the dominant stereotypes stick to the old figure of the poor illiterate unskilled Upper Egyptian migrants and add the figure of the conservative and sometime violent Upper Egyptian Islamic activist. It is partly in reaction to these stereotypes that low-middle class Cairene Upper Egyptians built their own counter-discourse on Upper Egyptian identity.

II. as-sa'idiyya in Cairo: the reference to an Upper Egyptian Identity and heritage

How far do Upper Egyptians in Cairo affiliate to a common Sa'îdi identity and what means to be a Sa'îdi in Cairo? During my field-work, I met people coming from various socio-economic profiles such as daily workers, door keepers (*bawwâb*), small traders, craftsmen, contractors, employees, teachers, nurses, students, graduates from University, young lawyers, house wives, unemployed and drug-dealers. They were between 20 to 65 years old, male and female, mostly Muslim (only two Christian family) and belong to the first, second and even third generation of migrants.⁴³ Their personal and family history was quite varied as well as their interaction with the outside Cairene society. In this sense, they did not form an homogeneous group and their perception of the Cairene and Upper Egyptian societies differed. But they shared at least three common characteristics:

- the fact of living in these *manâtiq ashwa'iyya*, with all the stereotypes attached to them
- a common regional origin at a time where Upper Egypt was considered as "the problematic" region of Egypt

⁴⁰ In Gizah and Cairo migrants from Upper Egypt (including Fayyoun and Beni Suef) represent almost 50% of the provincial migrant population.

⁴¹ Abu Lughod 1961, Florin 1999, Haeni 2001, Miller 2000, Oldham et al. 1987

⁴² Artin Pacha 1906, El-Messiri 1983, Toth 1999, Zohri 2002

⁴³ The field work took place mainly in Gizah : Abu Atata, Ard El-Liwa, Bulaq ad Dakrûr, Faysal, Imbaba, Talbeyya. I met about thirties families and twenty individuals, originating from Sohag and Qena Governorates, in two different types of setting: a) friendly encounters with families that I used to visit regularly just chatting, observing and listening daily matters and b) more formal tapped interview-settings discussing topics such as personal history, social networks in Cairo, the history of the district, the link with the home region, the socio-economic changes of the home-region, weddings and funeral traditions, etc.) In both settings, I was introduced by a young lawyer from Sohag Governorate living and working in Talbeyya.

- an aspiration to gain better material conditions and to reach the middle-class way of life, which includes a decent housing, a decent job, education opportunities for the children, but also middle-class moral values and ethics.

Their discourse reflect both a certain diversity and a certain uniformity concerning their definition of a Sa'îdi identity as well as their degree of self-affiliation to it. The feeling of “uniformity” may come from the fact that most people tend to advance rather conventional elements for defining the Sa'îdi identity. Claim of a distinctive Sa'îdi identity is primarily made by reference to a set of moral values and social attitudes associated to the core notion of *asâla* “origin”. Although people were sometimes mentioning some “objective” factors of cultural differences between Upper and Northern Egypt, (such as funeral traditions, marriage practices, housing or dialectal varieties), they usually tend to emphasize “subjective” moral values like loyalty to kinship ties, sense of honor, decency, courage, etc. because these moral values are perceived as ‘stable’ elements not related to specific place of living. Most of these supposedly specific Upper Egyptian moral values are, in fact, very common to all Middle-Eastern societies. Nevertheless, they are presented as core elements of a Sa'îdi cultural identity by opposition to the Cairene culture, perceived as decadent, westernized and dominated by women. In its most militant form, *as-sa'îdiyya* contests the “western” Cairene urban model and prone a counter-model associated with the original Arab ethics.

II. 1 as-Sa'îdiyya in the popular discourse : ‘Asâla

III.1. ‘Asâla and kinship

Although Upper Egyptians in Cairo came from various regional and social backgrounds, they usually agree that to be sa'îdi is an important component of their identity, which does not mean that it is an exclusive and unique affiliation. They are less consensual concerning the territorial delimitation of the Sa'îd. Some agree with the administrative official delimitation (from Gizah to Aswân) but many people, particularly those from South of Asyût consider that the real Sa'îd correspond to the *sa'îd al-juwwâni*, i.e. from Asyût to Aswân. More important, the main criteria for being a Sa'îdi was not the place of birth or living but the blood (*ad-damm*) or the genealogical origin, (*al-‘asl*). Therefore most of them will not identify themselves as Cairene (*masrâwi* pl. *masrâwa*) but as Upper Egyptians living in Cairo, even if born in Cairo. When asked if they considered themselves as Cairene, they usually reply: *Sâkin f-il qâhira lakin ‘asli sa'îdi* “I live in Cairo but my origin is Sa'îdi” or *mawlûd al-Qâhira lakin mukkhî sa'îdi* “Born in Cairo but my mind is Sa'îdi”

The mention of the *‘asl* (origin) refers to a place of origin ‘*masqat ras*’ or *mansha*’ but moreover to a genealogy (kinship affiliation) and to a set of values linked to this *‘asl*. By the virtue of his *‘asl*, each person is supposed to adhere to and keep a number of cultural values and attitudes, irrespectively of his place of living, because those cultural values are considered as constitutive of his identity.

“We came here, we have been raised here but we kept our tradition because we are linked to our *‘asl*. My father, my paternal uncle are in Cairo, another is in Alexandria but for all of us, our *mansha’*, our place is in Sa’îd. All the other members of the clan (*bêt*), the descents of my grand father are there. The basis is the *‘a’îla*, the *‘asl*. I know all the jokes about the Sa’îdi. But the ones who do not matter for his *‘asl*, from where is he coming? I am born in Cairo. Does it means that I am cut from the Sa’îd? Is it a shame to originate from as-Sa’îd? It is not the place I am raised in, but my *‘asl* which is important. Some others say no, I am raised in Mohandissen, I am from Mohandissen. They are ignorant”

(Ahmed, 23 year old, born in Bulaq ed-Dakrur, living in Ard El Liwa, family from Tima, Sohag Governorate)

“We are born here in Cairo, but our spirit, our head are Sa’îdi. We kept our principles, our Sa’îdi values because we have been raised as Sa’îdi. We don’t like concessions, we don’t like to bend our head”

(Ishmat, 22 y. old, born in Abu Attata, Diplôme Tijâra, from Juhayna origin, Sohag Governorate)

The emphasis on the *‘asl*, implies that kinship relation and kin solidarity are considered as one of the fundamental social structures. Family ethics is common to all Egyptians,⁴⁴ but all Upper Egyptians I met, including young girls born from mixed couples (mother from the Delta, father from Upper Egypt) were considering that adherence to the *‘asl*, strong family links and strong solidarity between members of the same family, same clan or same village, were the most characteristic features of Upper Egyptians. The division between *gharîb* (outsider) and *qarîb* (kin) is deeply rooted among Upper Egyptians in Cairo. Living among *qârîb*, is perceived as a social ideal, because it provides the individuals with a sense of comfort and security. This is particularly true for the first migrant generation who came to settle in a new environment and were often the first settlers on former agricultural areas or desert lands. To stay with relatives or people from the same village give the opportunity to establish *‘izwa* “groups”, which act as a protective collective force (Miller 2000). Therefore people tended, and still tends if they have the financial means, to cluster in the same area, to live in family buildings (*bêt ‘a’îla*), to work with relatives. Family or regional clustering is not restricted to the first migrant generation. In various occasion, groups of relatives who were living in the same area managed to move together in another new area and to attract relative from their original region. Migration to the Gulf countries helped members of extended families to buy land, to build houses and sometimes to invest in building estate. Therefore, it is common to hear that a given street or a given area is owned by the ‘sons’ of a given family or of a given area. Migration to the Gulf has been considered as a factor of family changes, helping the economic transition from extended family to nuclear family and increasing the women responsibility (Brink 1991). From my own observation, this is far to be systematic. Most of the families who had expatriate husbands/sons working in the Gulf

⁴⁴ Early 1993, Gosh 198 Rugh 1985, Singerman 1995, Sringbord 1982

were living in extended family unit. The expatriate's wife was staying with her in-laws or some time with her own relatives, waiting for her husband's return to stay in her own private flat. The only women acting as family head were either from very poor economical status or from "mixed" coupled (man from U.E; woman from Delta or Cairo).

The *qârib* ethics influences personal matters such as matrimonial choices. Many Upper Egyptians in Cairo are still very reluctant to marry their daughters to 'foreigners' and endogamy is considered the ideal type of marriage.

"In Cairo some people will give their daughters to foreigners, if they are good Muslims. I will never. If a foreigner come to me, I will never give him my daughter, I will give her to a son of my village (ibn baladi)"

Hajj Ahmed, 56 years, arrived in Cairo in 1956, from Araba (Markaz Balyâna), wood trader, Imbâba)

Many women are still married to more or less close relatives and I met two girls born in Cairo who got married to distant relatives living in Qena. One went there, could not adapt, came back to her family in Cairo and finally committed suicide. This does not mean that all Upper Egyptian girls in Cairo still get married exclusively to relatives. Many do marry from the neighborhood, but still parents are reluctant to have their daughters married to non-sa'îdi and many people considered that it is one of the main distinctive Sa'îdi characteristics.

"People from the Sa'îd are more strict and rigid than people from the North. They don't want to marry their daughters outside the 'a'îla. Sometimes, rarely, the girls can marry a foreigners. But the fellâhîn (Northerners) they don't mind. The girl can marry her cousin, her neighbor, there is no problem"

(Mona, 24 y., born in Gizah, father from Al-Minyah, mother from Mansûra, Living in Talbeyya)

The importance of not mixing with outsiders to preserve family intimacy can also be noted through small daily details, like closing or opening the entry doors of one's flat. The entry doors can be opened to bring more fresh air in the family buildings, because only relatives are staying in it. In mixed buildings, Upper Egyptian families are closing their door commenting on the lack of shame of other families who let their door open.

II.1.2 Kin and neighbors

This strict adherence to kin-solidarity and kin-networks raise sometimes problems with the non-kin neighbors. Upper Egyptians are often accused by Cairene and Northern Egyptians to live in close community without mixing easily with their neighbors. By doing so, they challenge the traditional *Hâra* culture. The historical and urban literature on Cairo has always stressed the importance of the *Hâra* culture within the historical popular quarters of Cairo. Inhabitants of the *Hâra* are supposed to form a close-knit community, sharing spatial proximity and cultural values. The concept of *ibn al balad* and *ibn al hâra* have symbolized the old popular urban Cairene culture (El-Messiri 1978, Nadim

1979). Like in many other Arabic urban societies (Tunis, Damascus, etc.) the neighborhood is considered as an essential component of the urban culture that gave birth to an 'identité de quartier'. Many proverbs stress the importance of neighbors solidarity like '*el-nabî wasa' 'ala saba' jâr*' (The Prophet recommended to take care of the neighbors in range of seven neighbors). This proverb was very often quoted by people originating from the Delta and living in Imbâba⁴⁵ but Upper Egyptians tend to refute this model and to privilege kin ties over other types of social solidarity. Social help provided by social welfare organizations were said to be 'a good thing' but considered to concern only people without family connection. Hearing a woman saying that neighbors and foreigners (i.e. like NGOs social workers) were often more helpful than kin, a man promptly reacted:

"The sister who said that the *gharîb* (outsider) is becoming better than the *qarîb* (kin), this is a particular situation. But she cannot do without her brother. She is his honor and his flesh. She will come back to her family. The *gharîb* does not fit at the end. He can be a dear neighbor, faithful and dedicated, but your kin is your kin. Blood does not change into water"

(Uztaz Jamal, 27 y. old, born in Cairo, Diplôme Tijâra, an-Nahya)

Some women were proudly claiming that they had little contact with their non-relative neighbors, just visiting them for social obligations (*wâjib*) and restricting their visits to relatives. This of course was not true, but was considered a honorable way of acting.

It may be noted however, that the discourse praising the superiority of kin-ties is more frequent in the most recent middle-class settlements (Shurbaji; Ard al-Liwa), where people are better off and want to distinguish themselves from the noisy and crowded popular areas. In the older and often poorer settlements (old Imbâba, Abu Atâta, old Talbeyya), the young generation tends to identify with the neighborhood and to develop strong relationship with their pairs through local clubs, coffee-shops, associations. The street, the district is described as *hitta wahda* "a unified area" where people mix together and where the youth are proud to be *ibna' al mantiqa* "sons of the district". Old-migrants who came from poor backgrounds, do not have extended family links and are sometimes married to non-Sa'îdi are also more inclined to praise the *sha'âbi* character of their neighborhood and the solidarity between neighbors.

"The cooperation between the neighbors are very strong in the *wâjib* (Social Obligations), in the celebrations, in the associations. Of course they help each other. If somebody is sick in the night, we don't let him alone, the neighbors go. We are all children of the street (*kulluna ibna' shari' wâhid*). If there is a problem with another district, all the people of the street, whatever their origin, unify"

(Mona, 24 y., born in Gizah, father from Al-Minyah, mother from Mansura, Living in Talbeyya)

"Many people are linked to the district, because they live here for 40-50 years. The district here is nice, I cannot leave it. I mixed with the people here, I married from them, I cannot go somewhere else because I got use to the place. The district is a popular (*sha'abi*) one. People help each other, unlike the rich districts."

⁴⁵ (source : a field study from Sameh Eid)

(‘Amm Muhammed, 56 years, ‘ajâlatî -repairing bicycles, born in Sohag, arrived in Cairo at 10 year old, married to a woman from the Delta, living in Abu ‘Attata near his wife relatives)

II.1.3 ‘Asâla and ethic

If family ethics is common to all Egyptians, it may be noted that many Upper Egyptians refer to ‘*a’îlât*, “extended families” or *bêt, badan* “lineages” and not to the more common Cairene terms *ahl* or ‘*usra* “family”. This seems to indicate that the concept of family varies according to the individual’s origin. It might be this affiliation to a larger family groups (‘*a’îla*), which is perceived as “more sa’îdi” by both outsiders and insiders, although it is also very common among people from Northern Provincial origin. An important point, which needs further investigations, is the fact that, from my own observations and available literature, Upper Egyptians belonging to big ‘*a’îlât*’ or tribal groups (*qabîla*) succeeded to establish stronger and more successful networks in Cairo. Most cases of successful collective settlement seem to have been undertaken by groups claiming an Arab origin.⁴⁶ Adherence to the ‘*asl*, is particularly referred to by people claiming to belong to well-known ‘*a’îlât* or tribal groups, even if they are among the poor members of these groups. They will made frequent references to their ‘*asl* in daily matters, as illustrated by the case of Sa’îd.

Sa’îd, 45 y. originating from Qûs, was working as a building keeper (‘*âris*) in a small building near al-Ahrâm street. He got his job through one of his relative, Gaber, working in Kuwait with the owner of the building (Mahmûd, himself from Qena). Sa’îd was also living in Gaber’s family building in Talbeyya. One day, Sa’îd and his wife quarreled with Mahmud’s wife and Sa’îd decided to quit his work. The quarrel was due to the fact that Mahmud’s wife (a Bahrâwiya) was not respecting him, was asking him many tasks, was treating him as a *bawwâb* and not as a ‘*âris*. Referring to his ‘*asl* (he claimed to belong to an Ashraf family), he said that it was impossible for him to accept such a humiliation. The Gaber’s family was annoyed because this created problems between them and Mahmud, the employer of Gaber, but they could not blame Sa’îd of reacting according to his ‘*asl*. To solve the problem, they ask Sabit, the young brother living in Qûs to come with his wife to take Sa’îd’s job in Cairo. They manage to find another job for Sa’îd in a near-by school

For any outsider, Sa’îd was the typical poor migrant worker, struggling for survival and obliged to accept low-level works. He was indeed living in a one-room flat with his wife and his three daughters and was often relying on his in-laws for help. Nevertheless, he was very proud of his ‘*asl*, and his ‘*a’îla* was owning many building in the area. I could witness that the clan solidarity was functioning and that the many relatives living in Gizah, Cairo, Kuwait, Qus, Luxor, etc. were forming a safety

⁴⁶ Urban studies on popular settlements usually do not pay specific attention to the clanic or tribal origin of the first settlers. However, I noted many indirect quotations that indicated that in a number of case, the settlers claim to belong to Arab group (cf. Deboulet 1994, El-Kadi 1988, Faroukhi 1987, Oldham et al. 1986)

network, albeit not without many internal quarrels and conflicts. Many other individuals, who look rather poor, at first glance, were also connected to big ‘â’ilât and were proud to mention it.

Reference to specific individual’s *‘asl* means that the people have kept links either with their original group or with their original region, even if they do not go there often. The migrants who are cut from the Sa’îd (like the old first generation migrants who usually came from poorest families, did not kept house or land, lost contact with their home-region and often intermarried with migrants from the Delta), avoid to talk about their precise genealogical affiliation because they come from low-level families. They rather insist on the moral values that are supposedly characterizing the Sa’îdi *‘asâla*, conceived here in more general terms: courage (*shahâma*), sense of honor (*sharaf*), respect of the aged-ones (*ihtirâm al-kibâr*), self-pride and refusal of concessions (*tanazullât*), virility (*ragûla*), control over the women (*al-muhâfza ‘ala-l-bint w-al-zawga*), physical resistance to hardship and willingness (*mukhkh gabbâr*) that help the Sa’îdi to perform hard-working tasks, ability to migrate and to move in order to find work, etc. The same people may recognize that this idyllic portray of the Sa’îdi personality can be endorsed by a non-Sa’îdi, who become in this case almost Sa’îdi! But still, they will insist, Upper Egyptians are more respectful towards religious and social obligations. They will never, for example, celebrate a marriage if a neighboring house is mourning. The sa’îdi cultural values are therefore described as more authentic (having more *‘asâla*), more respectful of the others and more religiously appropriate than the Cairene urban culture perceived as westernized, individualist and decadent.

“ I don’t think that all the people from Sa’îd are similar. Some became completely Cairene. Some forgot the Sa’îd, other stick to it. And some fellâhîn have customs close to us. But in general Fellâhîn and Masrâwa do not know the *wâjib*. A guest is coming, they will not provide all the *wâjib* but the Sa’îdi, he will know to provide all the *wâjib* for health, work, schooling. And also he respects the aged-ones, he will never talk badly to them like those young lads ... and a Sa’îdi girl she will remain polite and reserved... the Cairene girls, you see them sometimes walking in the street, excuse me, they look like .. like ”

Uztaz Jalal, 30 years, born in markaz Tahta, Sohag, Graduate from Commercial school, living in Talbeyya

II.1.4 Social variation

The development of a Sa’îdiyya popular discourse, praising the positive values of the Sa’îdi tradition is mostly a Muslim male public discourse. Women are far more reserved about it, especially the young girls born or raised in Cairo, who are rather critical about Upper Egypt, particularly regarding the status of women and the fact that many upper Egyptians still don’t care about girl education. Many women said that they felt *makhnûqa* ‘suffocated’ when going back even for few days in Upper Egypt and openly preferred the life in their Cairene district. As for the two Christian families I met, their reference to the Sa’îd was mainly formal. Although they claim their love of their original region (fresh

air, taste of the food, etc.), they had little to say about a supposed common Sa'îdi identity. Living in a very recent neighborhood ('Ard al-Liwa), they were rather defiant about their Muslim neighbors in Cairo (both Upper Egyptians and non Upper Egyptians) and their social life was organized exclusively through the Church. Their position and relationship with their neighbors seem quite different from what has been recorded in old Cairo districts such as Shûbra or Bûlâq Abu-Eila, where Christians and Muslims are said to live in close contact to each others. The 1990s events in Upper Egypt and the fact of living close to neighborhoods known for their Islamic activism obviously impede their affiliation to a common Sa'îdi identity.

Among the Muslim men, there is also a division between the older ones (45 and above) and the younger ones (20-40) more receptive to the Islamic and reformist discourse. The elders rarely critic the Sa'îdi patriarchal social organization (excepting the *târ*) nor the weight of the clans. On the contrary, the youth often complain about the patriarchal authority and call for a 'reform' that will give more individual freedom of speech and decision-making.

"there are many things that I dislike in my home-region. The power of the old-ones who never let a chance for the youth. When they say *khalâs*, there is nothing more to add. The head of the family (*kabîr al-'a'îla*), he can be wrong but everybody has to agree. No, everybody must give his opinions and not only listen to the old-ones! Here everybody discuss, gives his opinion, here there is understanding (*tafâhum*) and freedom. There no, your uncle says like this.. that's it"

(Amm Ali, 39y.old, from Jirja, arrived in Cairo at 22y., University Graduate, close to an Islamic Movement)

They also intend to eradicate the 'bad aspects' of the Sa'îdi culture and tradition (like the long and costly funeral ceremonies, the *târ*, the arranged marriages), which are attributed to ignorance. They want to defend the good 'Islamic aspects' of the Sa'îdi culture, not always agreeing on what is religiously correct or not, particularly regarding seclusion of women, which was a topic of hot discussions.

Uztaz Ahmed "- Sometimes, Upper Egyptian stick to bad things. They need to distinguish between the good traditions that they have to keep and even to ameliorate. They don't need to stick to odd traditions...The Prophet said that the husband has the right to see his wife (before the marriage). I don't agree with Hajj Kamal, the groom must see her face, it does not mean that he sees everything..."

Hajj Kamal: -You mean you look at the merchandise, and if you don't like it, you drop it and you go?"

U.A.: - " But Hajj, the Prophet said..."

H.K.: - "keep the traditions away from religion!"

U.A.: - "there is not something called tradition that you can separate from religion. This is why we are backward. If you are close to your religion you can progress..."

(a dialogue between Uztaz Ahmed , a young graduate and Hajj Kamal, a local Contractor from Girga, in Ard al-Liwa)

“Here in Cairo, some Sa’îdi people have taken the Cairene tradition for marriage. The bride and the groom are sitting together in the street. But some are more traditional and do not let their daughter going down in the street. And I encourage them. It is religiously appropriate. Religion said that the woman can not go out and you cannot greet her by hand...”

(Amm Ali, 39y.old, from Jirja, arrived in Cairo at 22y., University Graduate, close to an Islamic Movement)

At this stage, reference to the *‘asl* can be perceived as a transitory phenomenon characterizing a migrant community not yet well integrated in its new urban milieu. The fact that a number of youth tend to give less importance to genealogical affiliation and to rather identify themselves either with their district or with a wider ideology seems to corroborate this perception of a gradual shift from family/clan/regional affiliation to a wider urban affiliation. But there are evidences that the degree of adherence to the *‘asl* is not related to the time spent outside the original home region but rather to the individual’s or to the group’s self-image and to the prestige of its lineage. Moreover life-cycle plays an important role in this matter. Youth are not so concerned with *‘asl* because they know that their fathers are the one taking care and dealing with all these important issues. But they are also prepared to take over from their fathers when it will be needed. While in the 1950s and 1960s, many poor migrants from Upper Egypt had progressively lost ties with their home-region, this is not the case now for various reasons. First means of communication have improved and Upper Egypt is no more the far remote region it used to be. Most families I met, were in contact, even sporadically, with their home region and knew what was going on. Second, all people agreed that Upper Egyptian society had changed and developed in the last decades, which means that the social and cultural gap between Cairo and Upper Egypt is shrinking. Third, the Cairene Upper Egyptians are becoming a more structured community with an expanding emerging middle-class and elite. Today, the establishment of a growing number of economically powerful Upper Egyptians working as contractors, businessmen, traders, etc. helps to reinforce one’s self esteem and changes the relation that Upper Egyptians have both with their home-region and with the Cairene Society. These new powerful migrants, who often stayed and worked in the Gulf countries, participate actively in a kind of ‘Sa’îdi revival’.

II.2. Sa’îdiyya: toward a regional nationalism?

The valorization of the *‘asl*, conceived in a cultural rather than in a strictly genealogical frame, and associated with the Sa’îdi cultural practices, helps to create a larger mobilization, that expands further the kin/lineage affiliation and extends to the *baladiyyât* (persons from the same village or same regions) and to all persons who claim to share the Sa’îdi cultural values. The public instrumentalization of a common Sa’îdi culture/origin became an important component of political mobilization during elections and have been largely discussed in Egyptian newspapers and political studies (Longuenesse 1997, Mursi 1986). The reference to a common Upper Egyptian heritage helps

to gain the votes of a large electorate. In areas, known for their demographically important Upper Egyptian population, political parties look for Upper Egyptian candidates.

Moreover, many Upper Egyptian men claim that maintenance of Sa'îdi moral and cultural values help to organize the daily life of the residential areas in the Cairene context. According to them, it even justifies the dominant position of the Upper Egyptians within these areas. Mirroring the dominant discourse, they insist on the demographic and social dominance of Upper Egyptians who came with their tradition and stick to them, making those areas part of the Sa'îd.

“Here, everybody is from the Sa'îd, we are sharing the same traditions. Here, it is a part of our home region. Here the social ties between the people are strong. We know those of Girga. If we quarrel, a old-one will come and solve the problems. We organize a *majlis* and we solve the problems. He is from Sohag, I am Asyouti, but our habits are closed. The youth goes outside and meets his father, his uncle, his neighbor. He is afraid of what the people will say... We brought here the tradition of the Sa'îd and we try to adapt them to the area. We are the majority and you find other peoples who take the Sa'îdi habits because our social features are in agreement with the religion, with the tradition. So they are stable. And the newcomers have to adapt to us. And sometimes we are the newcomers but they (non-Sa'îdi) are the ones who have to adapt to us. The ties are stronger among us than among those from the Delta or the Cairene. Our traditions form an entity and this comes from the proximity of religion. It is semi-sacred”

(Ustaz Jamal, 27 y. old, born in Cairo, Diplôme Tijâra, an-Nahya)

The discourse about the Sa'îdi solidarity, the *'asâla* and the religious conformity helps to mobilize all the persons claiming a Sa'îdi origin in order to penetrate and dominate various political and social organizations.⁴⁷ By referring to a large Sa'îdi entity, it aims to overpass the divisions prevailing in Upper Egypt (between the various clans, families, groups etc.). Therefore by opening and widening the concept of *'asl* from a genealogical base to a regional and cultural base, it twists it and transforms it radically. The reference to a wider regional entity enables some Upper Egyptian men to become political or social figures in Cairo, while they are/were lacking the appropriate legitimacy and family status in their home region. Additional studies on individuals' itineraries are needed in order to estimate how far the Sa'îdi regionalism (in both Cairo and Upper Egypt) might help the ascension of individuals not connected to former dominant families. One example is the case of Ishmet Abu-l Kheir, a man from Balyâna (Sohag Governorate), who went to the Gulf, came to Cairo as a rich businessman, created a regional league (*rabta awlâd Belyâna*), acted as a *'ahl al kheir* (his office was always packed by *baladiyyât* coming for assistance), published his own small journal in 95-96 entitled *Sawt as-Sa'îd* (Voice of the Sa'îd) and was trying to gain a seat at the national Assembly. In Balyâna he would had no chance in front of the powerful Abu-Steit family who belong to the former Hawwâra aristocracy and occupy the parliament seat since its creation. Another interesting case of political instrumentalization of the Sa'îdiyya is the case of Mustafa Bakri, journalist, former member of the

Liberal party, candidate in 1995 in Helwan for the national election (Longueness 1997) and chief of al-Usbu' newspaper.⁴⁸ Surfing on the waves of Arabism, Nationalism, and sometimes religious Reformism, Mustafa Bakri does not hesitate to play the strings of Sa'îdi regionalism in his newspaper (see section II.3 below).

In sum, the popular discourse on Sa'îdiyya is characterized by its interaction with the urban Cairene dominant discourse, and almost mirrors it. It refers to both 'objective' and subjective factors. Among the objective actors are the family and clan structures which still play a prominent role in Upper Egyptian society. Among the 'subjective factors' is the idealization of an Upper Egyptian ethics considered as more authentic (*'asîl*) and close to religious duties. The construction of a Sa'îdi identity entails the passage from a family affiliation to a regional/cultural affiliation. This process is on the making and encompasses various trends and various perceptions of the Sa'îdiyya. It is at this levels that intellectuals and ideologues might play an important role. Some will highlights the religious components, others the Arab components, others the role of Upper Egypt as a historical pole of education and reform.

II.3. as-Sa'îdiyya in the intellectual discourse : Culture, Arabism and Regionalism.

The valorization of Upper Egypt is not new in the Egyptian intellectual history. 'Ulâma-s like al-Edfuwî⁴⁹ or al-Marâr⁵⁰ have acted to establish or rehabilitate the history of Upper Egypt, the role of Qûs, Esna, Jirja as religious urban centers and have established long list of eminent Upper Egyptian Ulâma-s symbolizing the Sa'îdi Nâhda (Renaissance). Many famous national Upper Egyptian figures, like Al-Tâhtâwî, Bâbâ Shenouda, Shaykh Tantâwî, al-'Aqqâd, Tâhâ Hussein, Abnoudi, Nasser, etc. are often quoted by Upper Egyptians to illustrate the enlightenment of Upper Egypt and its contribution to the national heritage.

In the 1990s, a number of institutional changes like the establishment of Regional Cultural Palaces, the creation of Regional TV channels including Channel 7 & 8 for Upper Egypt, the partial opening and liberalization of the press have widened the space of Upper Egyptian intellectual public involvement and have enhanced the expression of a Sa'îdi cultural movement. This movement includes, among others, a linguistic/literary component and a historical component. It aims toward a

⁴⁷ See Haenni 2001 for a description of the instrumentalization of regional origin together with political alliance and religious affiliation among a group of young local leaders in Imbâba.

⁴⁸ His brother Mahmûd Bakrî is also a journalist and a politician

⁴⁹ e.g. *Al-Tâli' as-Sa'id* by Shaykh Kamâl al-Dîn al-Edfuwî (15th c.) edited by Dr al Hâjarî with a preface of Sa'ad Mohammed Hasan in 1966, Dâr al-Misriyya li-l-ta'alîf w-al-tarjama

⁵⁰ R. Chih "Histoire religieuse de l'Égypte ottomane, vue de sa campagne", Seminar Iremam, Aix en Provence, 12/11/02.

cultural rehabilitation of Upper Egypt described as a land of rich heritage, cultural enlightenment and Arab tradition.

The linguistic and literary component includes the revival of popular and folkloric arts and their transformation into modern theatrical performances in the Cairene Artistic scenes, as in the case of the *Sîra Hilâliyya*. The *Sîra Hilâliyya* is well known in Egypt, particularly in the rural areas, where performers entertain the public on various occasions (Canova 1982, Slyomovics 1987). As many other forms of popular arts, it was a rather declining genre in the seventies. The most famous performers are from Upper Egypt, because a number of groups claiming an Hilâli origin are living there. The famous Upper Egyptian poet Abdel Rahman Al-Abnoudi, collected and published a writing and taped version of the *Sîra Hilâliyya*. In the mid-1990s a number of performances were given during the month of Ramadan in cultural centers like the Hanager theater, the British Council, etc and were attended by the Cairene intellectual elite. In 1994, an 'avant garde' theater group, Al-Warsha directed by S. Gretli, started to work on popular arts, particularly on the *Sîra Hilâliyya* with the famous performer, As-Sayyid ad-Dâwi, from Esna. Particular attention was given to the Upper Egyptian colloquial variety used by the singer and reproduced by the actors.

Abdel Rahman Abnoudi, himself, gave numerous poetic performances in various places including the prestigious Suzanne Mubarak library in Zamalak and Cairo Book Fare, always with a considerable audience. His poetry and writings are characterized by an elevated and literary Upper Egyptian Arabic dialect. He is certainly today the most famous contemporary Egyptian poet writing in colloquial Arabic⁵¹. Although he was, and still claim to be, a strong Arab nationalist he became a kind of "Upper Egyptian Voice" in the intellectual circles of Cairo. His poetry and writing give "ses lettres de noblesses" to the Upper Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, while Cairo speakers are often making fun of Upper Egyptian dialects, and while Colloquial literature is still considered as an inferior genre by many. Other Upper Egyptian writers and poets were occasionally praising the strength and the roots of the Upper Egyptian literature in the literary magazines like *Akhbâr al-Adab*. Long articles in *al-Usbû'* newspaper were also dedicated to the Upper Egyptian poet Ahmad ad-Dungul and writer Yahia Taher Ibrahim. It may be noted however that, contrary to the Nubian literature, there is no mention of a specific Upper Egyptian literary movement, which would be characterized by a specific content or style. Moreover, among the many writers of Upper Egyptian origin, only a few seem to be considered as "voices" of Upper Egypt.

The Upper Egyptian intellectual involvement includes also the public refusal of stereotyped images of the Sa'îdi in TV serials, films, *nuqta* "jokes", etc. and the acting toward a better image of Upper Egypt. A comic artist was accused of ridiculing Upper Egyptians and was even threaten of death. Every TV serial or film concerning Upper Egypt is now the topics of hot discussions in order to assess if it gives a 'true' perception of Upper Egypt and not a *muzawwara* picture, as could be seen with the

⁵¹ Salâh Jâhin and Bayram al-Tûnsî used to be the two most famous writers and poets in colloquial Arabic.

two famous serials *dhiab al jabal* and *khâlti sâfiyya w-ad dayr*. Having in mind the audience of each TV serial and their social repercussion (Abu Lughod 1997), this are not marginal affairs. Upper Egyptians film-makers and producers are now giving a particular attention to the linguistic aspect, and try to avoid the linguistic caricature of the old films and serials.⁵²

Language is often an important aspect of mobilization for collective identity in the making. In the case of Upper Egypt, the linguistic mobilization remains a rather marginal phenomenon even if some important figures like Abnoudi succeeded to reach a “mediatique” position. All Upper Egyptians are conscious of the dialectal differences between Upper Egyptian Arabic and Cairo Arabic, and many think that Sa’îdi dialects are closer to Classical Arabic than Cairo Arabic. Few of them, however, consider that speaking an Upper Egyptian dialect is an essential component of Upper Egyptian identity. This might due to the specific and complex linguistic situation of the Arab world in general, where dialects are almost never considered as ‘true language’ compared to Classical Arabic.

Regional history is becoming an important domain of historical re-examination. A number of recent academic Egyptian publications have point to the heroic resistance of Upper Egypt during the French Expedition (Tûkhî 1997), to the historical importance of cities like Qûs, Esna, Jirja, to the Nâhda of Jirja (Mahmûd 2002) and to the role of the Arab tribes in Upper Egypt (Ahmed 1986 & 1987, al-Rayti 1996). New books concerning the Arab genealogical affiliation in Egypt have come out, sometime receiving Gulf funding (al-Bari 1992, al-Tayyeb 1993). *Al-Usbû’* published for one year (1997-1998) a long series of papers by Faysal Sâlih al-Khayri describing the various *qabâ’il* “tribes” of Egypt, which was a rather surprising event in the Egyptian National Press. In many respects, the emerging Sa’îdiyya discourse can be analyzed as ‘the come-back of the tribe’ in a country, where tribal structures were supposed to have been almost eradicated since the late 19th c., and were only surviving in the margins (Western and eastern deserts, Sinai). The conflict which opposed Abnoudi to the members of the Bani Hilâl tribe in 1996, following the hijacking of a tourist plane in Luxor (see Gamblin, this volume) was a perfect illustration of this “tribal revival” in the media. The conflict, which extended several months, was reported by various newspapers, including *al-Usbû’* and, thank to high level mediation, ended happily by a big reconciliation-meeting in Luksor, broadcast by Channel 8. People could discover that high-rank officials had a ‘tribal affiliation’. What is important here, is not the events *per se*, but the visibility given to them, and all the discourse which tends to rehabilitate “the tribe” or at least the Arab genealogical affiliation. The “tribe” is no more described as an archaic phenomenon but as one of the main base of the Egyptian culture, particularly that of Upper Egypt, where the demographic importance of the Arab groups is historically attested. At a more popular level, people in Cairo do not ordinarily mention their “tribal” affiliation because it is not considered as a primordial means of external identification. However, as mentioned before, all members of groups

⁵² e.g. the film *an-Nâkhla* by Radwân El-Kashif (1999) or the theatrical adaptation (1998) of *at-tawq w-al*

claiming an Arab lineage are proud of their *‘asl*. Moreover, many stress the cultural Arab character of Upper Egypt compared to Cairo. Many people who worked in the Gulf countries were keen to explain how it was easy for them, as Sa’a’îda, to adapt to the Gulf countries because of the similarities between the geographical contexts, the cultures, the traditions (particularly concerning seclusion of women) and the dialects. For them, Upper Egyptian society is considered as being more close to the “original Arab culture” than the Cairo society.

The link between Upper Egyptian regionalism and Arab nationalism is particularly perceptible in the *al-Usbû’* newspaper, created in February 1997. Officially *al-Usbû’* does not claim to be an Upper Egyptian newspaper but rather a political journal defending an Arab nationalist position. However, most of his staff and contributors are from Upper Egypt including writers like A. Abnoudi, , M. Mustagab, al-Ghitânî and the targeted audience is clearly Upper Egyptians in both Cairo and Upper Egypt. *al-Usbû’* organizes cultural events in Upper Egypt and intends to play a reformist role in both Upper Egypt and Cairo. Every events, from national political affairs to daily news items, are the occasion to critic the governmental central politics, to defend and praise the Sa’îdi cultural values, (including the Arab and the tribal heritage) but also to question the possibilities of reform within Upper Egypt. From small announces to main titles, constant references are made to the Sa’îd, its Arab culture, its people. Occasionally, the journal does not hesitate to mention the risk of a potential Upper Egyptian “secession” against the Central power, if the later does not take the necessary political and economical measures.⁵³ It may be noted however, that the Sa’îdi regionalist trend is only one component of this journal, which develop also a more classical Arab nationalist style against Zionism and American Imperialism.

Conclusion

Upper Egypt has a long history of autonomy and resistance to the Central government. It has also its geographical specificity (the Nile Valley) and its cultural and religious specificities, at least when compared to Cairo and Central Delta. Yet the formation of a Sa’îdi identity based on the concept of a specific region seems to be a rather new phenomenon. Migration to the Gulf and to Cairo, as well as socio-economics factors, have played an important role in the emergence of a collective identification. Like any other ‘national or regional movement’ the Sa’idiyya develops as much in the Diaspora than in the home regions. The interaction with the Cairene society and culture, and the “ethno-centrism” of the Cairene elite, had played an important role in the development of the Sa’idiyya discourse, which mainly reflects the social aspiration of the new Cairene Upper Egyptian low/middle class. The members of this class, who managed to raise their social status via education and migration and live

‘aswira from a novel by Yahia Tahir Abdallah

mainly in the spreading periphery of Cairo, refuse to be considered as second-class urban citizen. The discourse about *'asâla*, moral values and Arab heritage reflect the covert tensions of the Egyptian society and the different conceptions of modernity and urbanity. In a way, as-sa'idiyya challenges the cultural model of the Western-oriented Egyptian elite. as-sa'idiyya starts to have its writers and poets, its ideologues, its politicians but, yet, it is still a rather “young phenomenon” and it is difficult to assess its real impact. Upper Egyptians do not form a homogeneous community, and internal social tensions and divisions are important. A number of young educated Cairene Upper Egyptians just share the common aspiration/dream of any Egyptian urban dwellers: a decent and quite life for them and their family. The Egyptian political crisis of the 1990s (the State of war in many Upper Egyptian regions) as well as a more global context witnessing the revival of regionalism and communitarism in many parts of the world, have favored the diffusion of a Sa'idi “nationalist” discourse, instrumentalized by a certain political opposition. Yet, for the time being, nothing indicates if this emerging Sa'idi identity will or will not become an important actor of change in the Egyptian political and social arena, or if it will remain a kind of culturalist discourse.

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⁵³ al-Usbû', March 2001

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